

# Connecting The Canon To Current Young Adult Literature

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## Abstract

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*In this article we discuss the respective roles of young adult literature and literary texts in the secondary level English Language Arts classroom and explore the connections that can be made between popular young adult books and the traditional canon. We provide examples showing how young adult literature bestsellers such as *The Book Thief*, *Looking for Alaska*, *Smile*, *Eleanor & Park*, and *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* can be paired with canonical texts such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Little Women*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Death of a Salesman*, and *Night*. Furthermore, we provide a rationale that teachers can use with secondary level colleagues and administrators to support the use of young adult literature in the secondary English classroom.*

Although works of young adult literature (YAL) have become more acceptable in secondary classrooms, they may still be viewed as subsidiary to canonical literature. Advocates of canonical texts point out their cultural and literary importance, their contribution to a common knowledge base, and the accolades they have long received from literary experts. Advocates for YAL, on the other hand, argue that adolescents can more easily relate to such works and that they provide easier access for struggling readers (Connors & Shepard, 2013). Although literary critics and educators debate the pros and cons of classic and contemporary texts, we believe these two categories of texts are most powerful when they are connected rather than when pitted against one another. We believe that using YAL as a scaffold for canonical literature in secondary English Language Arts classrooms takes advantage of

the strengths of both categories and benefits readers of all types as they navigate what it means to construct literary meaning.

### Young Adult Literature Versus the Literary Canon

Young adult literature is defined by several characteristics: the protagonist is a teenager, the plot does not end in a “storybook” happy ending, and the content is typically a coming-of-age story (Cole, 2008, p. 49). The coming-of-age content may sometimes become controversial because such stories focus on experimentation and emotional distress as well as an array of issues from eating disorders to drug use. YAL is often the go-to reading for teenagers. As Cole (2008) suggested, there may be teenagers who gravitate towards canonical, traditional texts, but most teenagers who are given the choice will reach for a YAL novel.

The literary canon is defined as a collection of classic literary texts that are distinguished by overall literary quality, lasting significance, and a distinctive style that is worthy of study (Cole, 2008). The collection of texts that make up the canon was largely sanctioned by a few prominent literary critics from the 1930s (Pike, 2003). Almost a century later, reading and analyzing these texts is still mandated for students at the secondary level so that grandparents and parents have read the same novels their children are now reading in school (Wolk, 2010). Some texts that are part of the canon may also be categorized as young adult literature, such as *Catcher in the Rye* (Cole, 2008). Nevertheless, the canon still prevails, as seen in the exemplar texts of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2012).

The canon includes texts that have been around since the 17th century. In contrast, YAL as a category was only separated from children’s literature in 1957, so it has not yet had time to establish its literary merit among generations of critics that distinguished works such as Shakespearian plays from other literature (Liang, 2013). Despite its relative “newness,” arguments for including YAL in the curriculum span many years and many educators, ranging from veteran teachers to professors of pre-service teachers. Bean and Moni (2003) argued that teaching canonical texts promoted teacher-centered approaches to meaning-making and that ready-made and easily available literary analyses denied students opportunities for critical thinking. In contrast, teaching YAL emphasizes the importance of student voices in constructing meaning and provides space for students to become active learners rather than passive receivers of information.

Alsup (2010) provided a multitude of reasons for incorporating YAL into the classroom, from the cultural diversity of YAL authors to the moral sense in YAL that helps teens consider right and wrong in a complex world with unique 21st century problems. Contemporary YAL addresses content such as cultural norms revolving around technology that is simply not applicable to older canonical texts. Despite the evidence that YAL texts can be useful

and effective in the secondary classroom, they continue to be criticized and censored more than any other text in the secondary curriculum. Cole (2008) pointed out that the most common issue with YAL is the use of vulgar language but suggested that the majority of censorship cases against YAL revolved around fear that students would be exposed to worldviews different from their own.

Crowe (2001) suggested that the label of “young adult” might cause teachers and parents to assume the worst about YAL, focusing on the juvenile and immature covers and the subpar writing in a few bad examples of YAL. Traditionalists might argue, “if something is entertaining, it certainly cannot be worthwhile” (Crowe, 2001, p. 147), but we reject that the assumption that reading for adolescents in school cannot be engaging, fun, AND significant. That assumption is hurting not only reluctant and struggling readers, but also motivated readers who lose the aesthetic pleasure of reading.

### Preparing Future Teachers of Literature

The focus in our teacher preparation program is preparing pre-service teachers not only to teach the expected canon but also to defend the choice of using young adult literature in their future classrooms. In the two pre-service courses that we teach at the university, our goal is to cultivate a love for books and learning, and we believe that reading literary texts can be both engaging AND a significant contribution to a student’s intellectual stimulation.

In the first course, students learn how to teach literature in the secondary classroom with a focus on canonical texts. They read classic literature such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and explore various methods and technologies that readers can use to respond to texts. They also examine how various literary theories provide different lenses through which students can interpret these texts, including Reader Response Theory, Social Justice Theory, Gender Theory, Postcolonial Theory, Historical Criticism, and Formalist Criticism. Students use these theories to construct textual meaning, and they discuss how such theories can facilitate the construction of textual meaning by their future students. The course culminates with students applying all they have learned by creating a one-week plan for teaching a selected literary text.

In the second course, students are exposed to nine different young adult novels varying in grade level. These texts are chosen based on their Goodreads rating, popularity and award status, diversity of genre and content, and controversial topic content. We expose these future teachers to the controversial content in young adult literature for three reasons. First, we would do our students a disservice by shielding them from a very controversial world because creating critical consumers and functioning citizens is an essential task for all 6-12 classroom teachers. Secondly, controversial young

adult literature prepares pre-service teachers to identify, analyze, and synthesize the controversial topics in canonical texts and to use an easier and more engaging text as a scaffold for dissecting a more complex canonical text. Finally, our future teachers need practice in defending the use of controversial texts as well as exposure to controversial topics, such as cancer, suicide, bullying, mental illness, stereotypes, and historical tragedies such as the Holocaust, because they will certainly face many of those topics in their future classrooms.

### Pairing the Canon with YAL

Our goal as teachers is to cultivate a love for books and learning, and we believe that reading and analyzing a text can be both engaging AND a significant contribution to a child's intellectual stimulation. As Rosenblatt (1995) suggested, teachers need to instruct students on how to read for aesthetic as well as informational reasons. By combining the aesthetic pleasure of reading YAL with the more analytical reading of canonical texts, teachers can instruct students on both how to enjoy a novel and how to get more out of it.

Pairing the canon with YAL is an example of scaffolding, an instructional practice that supports learners as they move from their current skill level to their desired skill level (Driscoll, 2005). One approach to instructional scaffolding in literacy instruction is making connections from one text to another through methods such as bridging or reading ladders. The instructional practice of bridging was introduced by Herz and Gallo (2005), and the practice has also been advocated by Kaywell (2000) in her four volume series *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics*. Bridging involves using young adult texts as a more accessible "entry or bridge" to classic texts by way of a common theme, plot, character, setting, or other similar element (Herz & Gallo, 2005, p. 12). Herz and Gallo argued that creating such a bridge promotes positive attitudes about reading and literature while also encouraging students to analyze and interpret texts themselves rather than relying on prescriptive readings delivered by the teacher.

The practice of bridging is similar to the concept of reading ladders promoted by Terri Lesesne (2010). A reading ladder, however, utilizes several different texts to incrementally move readers to more complex literature. As Lesesne suggested, "reading ladders take students from one level of reading to the logical next step" (p. 47) rather than throwing students straight into a complex read without scaffolded instruction to help them comprehend the many intricacies present in canonical texts.

This isn't to say that young adult literature is simpler than the canon--but, as Lesesne suggested, the best way to begin to scaffold is by using a book that "has already found a connection to a student" (p. 48). In this way, readers begin reading a book with aspects they like and can relate to (e.g. an author, theme, genre), and then they connect those elements to a book

they may find less appealing (Lesesne, 2010). Whether through the practice of bridging or the use of a reading ladder, this gradual introduction of theme, plot, or genre characteristic through a text that students are more motivated to read allows for an easier, scaffolded transition into the canonical text.

Table 1 acts as a visual representation and a quick reference guide for pre-service and in-service teachers as well as for university faculty who are preparing teachers for the field. It summarizes some suggestions of connections that can be made between popular young adult novels with literary merit and the canonical literature that is often required by secondary English Language Arts curricula. The table is followed by a more extensive description and rationale that includes a Goodreads rating for each young adult literature text. The Goodreads website is a popular platform used to rate books based on a five point scale. At the time of this publication, Goodreads had over 40 million members, 1.3 billion books, and 47 million reviews. Following the list of examples, we discuss some useful ways to combine texts and provide a rationale for using young adult literature texts in the classroom.

**Table 1- Young Adult Literature and Canon Connections**

YAL Novel	Canonical Connection(s)	Connecting Element(s)
<i>The Book Thief</i> by Markus Zusak Goodreads rating 4.35/5 out of 821,132 ratings	<i>The Diary of a Young Girl</i> by Anne Frank <i>Night</i> by Elie Wiesel	Event- The Holocaust
<i>Smile</i> by Raina Telgemeier Goodreads rating 4.12 out of 60,891 ratings	<i>Little Women</i> by Alcott <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> by Salinger <i>Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry</i> by Taylor	Theme- Coming of age
<i>Mockingbird</i> by Erskine Goodreads rating 4.16 out of 17,512 ratings	<i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> by Harper Lee	Characters- Similar plot lines, characters, differing themes <i>Mockingbird</i> references <i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> several times
<i>Unwind</i> by Shusterman Goodreads rating 4.19 out of 110,977 ratings	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> by Ray Bradbury <i>1984</i> by Orwell	Theme- Dystopian society and totalitarian government
<i>Eleanor &amp; Park</i> by Rowell Goodreads rating 4.16 out of 294,805	<i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i> by Shakespeare <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> by Jane Austen	Theme- Star-crossed lovers <i>Eleanor &amp; Park</i> references <i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i> several times

Table 1- Young Adult Literature and Canon Connections (cont.)

<i>Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children</i> by Ransom Riggs Goodreads rating 3.79 out of 302,611	<i>The Metamorphosis</i> by Kafka <i>Lord of the Flies</i> by Golding	Theme/genre- Peculiarity, magical realism
<i>If You're Reading This</i> by Reedy Goodreads rating 4.02 out of 432 ratings	<i>Death of a Salesman</i> by Arthur Miller <i>The Kite Runner</i> by Hosseini	Theme- Father/son relationship, Muslim stereotypes
<i>Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie</i> by Jordan Sonnebligh Goodreads rating 4.25 out of 15,243 ratings	<i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i> by Twain <i>Catcher in the Rye</i> by Salinger	Theme- Coming of age, grief
<i>Looking for Alaska</i> by John Green Goodreads rating 4.16 out of 552,044 ratings	<i>Death of a Salesman</i> by Miller <i>The Awakening</i> by Chopin <i>The Great Gatsby</i> by Fitzgerald <i>Breakfast at Tiffany's</i> by Truman Capote	Event- suicide Theme- gender roles/ societal expectations

**The Book Thief.** Written by Markus Zusak (2007), this Holocaust novel centers around a young German girl, Liesel, and the Fuhrer's manipulation of German citizenry. *The Book Thief* is a complex, beautifully written novel narrated by Death. Despite a lower lexile level, we recommend *The Book Thief* for a high school classroom, with 10th grade being the ideal grade level. A young adult literature text that has many academic connections and purposes, *The Book Thief* is a motivating read and an excellent scaffold into canonical texts which focus on the Holocaust such as Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947, 1993) and *Night* by Elie Wiesel (1972, 2006). It should be noted, however, that *Night* is best suited for more mature readers as it explores topics such as religion and moral depravity and discusses the horrors of concentration camps in a more detailed manner than the other texts do.

All three texts focus on the experience of a young protagonist during the Holocaust, which provides a ground for comparing and contrasting the differing identities and experiences of these protagonists. When *The Book Thief* is paired with *The Diary of a Young Girl*, readers can analyze the two young, female protagonists, considering the similarities and differences between Anne and Liesel and their experiences and perspectives. Because of the unique form of these texts, students can also compare the diary genre of *The Diary of a Young Girl* or the autobiographical genre of *Night* with the unusual narrative structure of *The Book Thief*, exploring how the form of each text functions rhetorically to convey a message and point of view.

**Smile.** *Smile* (Telgemeier, 2010) is a graphic novel perfect for reluctant readers in middle school. The ideal grade level is 6th grade, because the

book is concise and visually appealing but still depicts essential coming-of-age themes such as staying true to yourself. Despite the overall positive message, *Smile* also realistically portrays the impact of bullying and student clichés. A fantastic introduction to graphic novels and other texts using images and visuals, this text scaffolds into more complex coming-of-age novels such as *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868, 1994), *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1945, 1991), and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976, 1991). Both *Little Women* and *Roll of Thunder* appear on the Common Core State Standard's list of exemplar texts for 6-8th grade. All of these novels focus on the life experiences that the protagonist must navigate on the journey to adulthood. In particular, *Smile* may pair nicely with *Roll of Thunder* and *Little Women* as these texts feature a young female protagonist. While *Smile* deals with more modern issues such as school bullying, this could be discussed in relation to the theme of racial prejudice in *Roll of Thunder*, which is about a nine year-old African American girl growing up amidst racial tension during the Depression in the South. In addition to comparing the themes of bullying and racial prejudice, students can also explore the rhetorical and literary effect of graphic novels by analyzing the use of images in *Smile* with the use of text in *Roll of Thunder* to both convey emotion and a sense of injustice.

**Mockingbird.** *Mockingbird* (Erskine, 2010) is written through the eyes of a young girl, Caitlin, with Asperger's syndrome. Despite the lower lexile, this text covers not only bullying and stigmas concerning developmental disorders but also a school shooting in which the main character's brother dies. Because of the emphasis on grief, the ideal grade level for this text would be 7th or 8th grade. It can even be used in a lower-level 9th grade class to help student reading fluency and confidence. This text naturally scaffolds to *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960, 1988) as Erskine (2010) references the novel several times throughout *Mockingbird*. Both texts deal with very serious themes and explore how children perceive and respond to such events. The plot of *To Kill a Mockingbird* involves accusations of rape and the existence of racial injustice. The plot of *Mockingbird* focuses on a school shooting. Both texts contain a young female protagonist and also focus on the relationship between the protagonist and her father. Notably both stories involve the protagonist attempting to navigate a world that she does not understand. Because Caitlin has Asperger's syndrome she struggles to understand the world as anything other than black and white. Caitlin's struggles are noteworthy because few texts in the canon depict individuals on the autism spectrum in a non-stereotypical manner. Although Caitlin may be different from many readers, her struggle to cope after a crisis, like Scout's struggle to navigate an adult world, should be relatable to all readers.

**Unwind.** *Unwind*, by Neal Shusterman (2009) is the first novel of a quadrilogy. It is being used more and more commonly in the high school classroom, *Unwind* covers an array of controversial topics, including abortion, propaganda, organ donation, assault, religion, and a corrupt government.



The novel's premise is that a third world war made abortion at birth illegal, but "unwinding" and harvesting an adolescent's organs by order of a parent-initiated "unwind order" between the ages of 13 and 17 is legal. The story follows three characters, Risa, Lev, and Connor, all from different parts of the society's class system, in fighting against unwinding. Due to the many controversial topics, *Unwind* should be taught in high school, ideally between 10th and 12th grade. Because of the focus on a dystopian society and totalitarian government, the text scaffolds neatly into Orwell's *1984* (1949, 1961) and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1951, 1995). Pairing *Unwind* with either of these texts can open discussions about the dystopian genre which has become quite popular in young adult literature. Connecting popular YAL to a tradition of dystopian narratives can help students to better understand the characteristics and history of the genre and how it is often used as social commentary. One possible point of discussion is the use of invented and appropriated words in both *Unwind* and *1984*. *1984* uses a plethora of new words such as "Newspeak," "thoughtcrime," and "doublethink." Similarly, *Unwind* includes terms such as "unwind" and "harvest camp" and also appropriates words like "tithe" and gives it a new meaning. Analyzing how the novels include these words can foster a conversation about the power of language and how it can be used by those in power to control society as well as how these characteristics fit into the dystopian genre.

***Eleanor & Park.*** *Eleanor & Park* (Rowell, 2013) is a modern *Romeo and Juliet* minus the suicidal climax. It is a love story between Eleanor, a young, red-headed, impoverished girl, and Park, a boy from an upper-middle class family. The cultural aspects, abusive relationships, and brief but mature sexual content make this a complex yet motivating read for 11th or 12th grade students. The text's theme of young love and its frequent reference to the play makes *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 1992) an obvious choice to which to scaffold. The differences in genre, a novel and a play, can also provide an interesting point of comparison. Students could even bridge these two genres by transforming part of *Eleanor & Park* into a play and/or transforming part of *Romeo and Juliet* into a novel as they explore how different genres tell an unlikely love story. The focus in *Eleanor & Park* on love which rejects societal expectations and bridges socioeconomic statuses also provides a connection to classic literary texts such as Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813, 2014) and Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847, 2014), both of which the CCSS considers exemplar texts for 11th and 12th grade students. Such pairings can facilitate discussions on historical and modern conceptions of romantic love and the societal constructs which different times and cultures place on it.

***Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children.*** A unique novel based on several "peculiar" images the author picked up at a garage sale, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs (2011) can be used to make historical connections as well as connections to the canon. A quick yet mystical and mysterious read for 9th or 10th graders, *Miss Peregrine's*



*Home for Peculiar Children* follows Jacob as he travels to a Welsh island after his grandfather's sudden death only to discover an island on which there are several "peculiar" children with magic powers that live in a time loop that prevents their aging. Jacob then discovers his grandfather's connection to these children and his own peculiarity. The novel's focus on the fear and isolation often associated with difference makes it a nice scaffold into Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915, 2004) which the CCSS suggests for 9-10th grade students. Both texts are short and quick reads and incorporate aspects of magical realism and include themes about adjusting to difference. Analyzing such texts can provide a space for discussing how our society defines "peculiarity" or deviance from normality and who gets to decide what is normal. This is a topic to which many adolescents will no doubt be able to relate. Because *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* focuses largely on the relationship between a group of children, the novel can also be paired with *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954). Because both texts are different genres, they can be contrasted as students analyze how each text deals with the interpersonal relationships between the children characters and the potential existence of monsters and beasts. Each genre treats these themes differently with *Miss Peregrine* taking a more positive perspective on what children can accomplish when working together, while *Lord of the Flies* takes a more skeptical perspective. Additionally, the monsters in *Miss Peregrine* turn out to be real, while the beast in *Lord of the Flies* turns out not to be real. Analyzing the similar set-up of the plot and the different outcomes can help students learn about the characteristics of different genres.

**If You're Reading This.** *If You're Reading This* (Reedy, 2014) is a collection of letters and narratives focused on a young man's reconnection to his father who passed away fighting in Afghanistan as a soldier. The letters mysteriously began arriving on Mike's 16th birthday and have a list of adventures and pieces of advice that his dad wants him to explore. Through these letters, Mike reconnects with his father and begins to find closure for himself and his family after his father's untimely death. This text is best taught in 10th through 12th grade since the students should be ready and mature enough to handle controversial topics and discussions regarding the Middle Eastern culture. This heartfelt novel about the real-world consequences of the war in Afghanistan allows for classroom conversations to center around false Middle Eastern stereotypes and the duty of soldiers. Because of the focus on a father-son relationship, the text can be paired with Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949, 2000). Although both texts focus on father-son relationships, they are set in different times and involve vastly different philosophical issues. Both, however, can be connected to discussions on the American Dream, how this concept is constructed, and criticisms of this concept. Although not a canonical text, *If You're Reading This* would also pair nicely with the contemporary adult novel *The Kite Runner* (Hosseini, 2003). *The Kite Runner* also focuses on a father-son relationship but takes place

in the Middle East with the main characters from Afghanistan. As such, this novel provides another point-of-view on the political turmoil in Afghanistan. Although *If You're Reading This* would serve as a great way to scaffold to the more complex *The Kite Runner*, *The Kite Runner* does contain adult content and is therefore best suited for more mature readers.

***Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie.*** *Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie* is written by Jordan Sonneblith (2006) and, despite its rather jovial title, is a heart-wrenching novel about a middle school boy named Steven whose life is changed by his little brother's leukemia prognosis. A great novel for a 6th or 7th grade class, this novel exemplifies the strength and optimism necessary to help a friend or family member through the battle with cancer. A coming-of-age novel with connections to psychoanalysis of grief and depression, this text can be made as simple or as complex as necessary, and so, out of the novels in this article, is the most versatile. Because of the coming-of-age theme, this novel can be scaffolded to canonical texts such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Twain, 1876, 2014) for middle school readers and *Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1945, 1991) for 9th grade readers. Students may find it beneficial to compare and contrast the main characters, Tom Sawyer, Steven Alper, and Holden Caulfield, exploring their different life experiences and how they choose to respond to the different situations that happen to them. Common themes to discuss include identity, family, and belonging. Notably, students will find many differences between Steven and Tom or Holden. These differences, however, can be a great place to start a discussion about the coming-of-age theme and how it has changed throughout time as the experiences of adolescents have changed. Students can analyze the texts to discover similar characteristics between the narratives – such as trying to navigate an adult world and trying to establish an identity – despite the differences in detail.

***Looking for Alaska.*** *Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2005), another tear-inducing John Green novel, less known compared to *The Fault in Our Stars*, follows the main character, Miles, through his boarding school experience. A coming-of-age novel centered around the loss of a dear friend to possible suicide, this novel is easily the most controversial text out of the recommended texts above, particularly due to its explicit sexual content. However, despite the controversy, it is also one of the most memorable reads and surely a novel that even reluctant readers would be interested in reading. It speaks very realistically and truly to high school students and their interactions and lends itself to conversations about grief and suicide prevention. The novel's discussion of suicide can link it to classic texts such as *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1949, 2000) and *The Awakening* (Chopin, 1899, 2014) both of which involve protagonists who ultimately decide that suicide is the only means by which to free them from the burden of societal expectations. It can also be tied to canonical texts such as *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925, 2004) and Truman Capote's novella, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1960, 1986).

Students will no doubt find a lot of similarities between the male protagonists of *Looking for Alaska*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, all of whom are trying to navigate a new social context, and the main female characters - Alaska Young, Daisy Buchanan, and Holly Golightly. In these three texts, the male protagonists idealize and romanticize the main female character. Teachers can introduce students to feminist literary criticism and have students analyze *Looking for Alaska* before scaffolding to a feminist reading of one of the canonical texts. Students can discuss how the gender of the authors (all male) might affect how the texts are written, how the characters are portrayed in relation to gender stereotypes, and how the gender of the reader affects each student's interpretation of the text.

### Practical Methods for Scaffolding the Canon with YAL

While there are many benefits of pairing YAL and canonical texts, the practicality of doing so can be questioned due to time constraints, a full curriculum, and hesitation from parents and/or administration. In regard to time, one solution is asking students to read one or several YA texts over the summer. The teacher can then refer to those texts throughout the semester. Another suggestion is using book clubs in which students read a YA text with a small group of students while the class reads a canonical text. If time does not permit including a full YA text, teachers can also assign an appropriate excerpt. Doing so will likely encourage some students to read the entire novel on their own.

To be a proper scaffold, the YA book should be read before the paired canonical text in order to truly serve as a ladder, but preparing to read the canonical text must be an active process. Merely reading one text and then the next without instructional guidance will not create a ladder. Prior to reading, teachers should decide, based on class objectives and goals, what aspects of the books to focus on and encourage students to begin analyzing the YA text for such aspects.

For character and genre comparisons, a graphic organizer with columns for both texts may be helpful, with students taking notes on directed areas of the YA novel and then going back to add notes to the other column when reading the canonical text. For a unit on the Holocaust or social injustice, teachers can use a KWL chart, which asks students to think about what they *know* about a subject, what they *want to know* and then what they *learned* about the subject after reading. For thematic connections, small group or class discussions can be an effective means for students to compare and contrast the paired books. In such cases, the teacher may want to allow the students to write some of their own discussion questions. Finally, if the teacher wants to encourage a more open-ended connection between the two texts, a reading journal may be used to allow students a free-range response to the YA text.

Once students have read, engaged with, and begun to analyze both novels, we suggest that a culminating individual or group project will assist students in fully finding the connection between YAL and the canon and can be used for assessment purposes. We suggest that students be given some choice in the form and content of their final project, but we suggest some sort of mashup or remix which incorporates both texts in the act of creating a new text. For example, students might create a radio broadcast about the Holocaust which incorporates experiences from *The Book Thief* and *Night* or write a modern narrative version of *Romeo and Juliet* using *Eleanor and Park* as a model or create an infographic about the characteristics of a dystopian narrative incorporating examples from *Unwind* and *1984*. Such a project helps students to “read creatively” by blending a critical and a creative response to both texts (Jenkins & Kelley, 2013). Doing so can help students not only build a ladder from YAL to canonical texts but to continue to climb the literacy ladder and become authors themselves.

### Rationales for Using YAL

Pre-service teachers often state that they would love to teach YAL texts, but they are afraid their administration would frown upon it. In fact, this is not an unfounded concern. Many teachers face pushback, particularly from parents but even from fellow teachers, who think that YAL titles are “not the classics” and that they “corrupt children” (Crowe, 2001, p. 46). It is essential, then, to offer a rationale for the use of these texts not only as scaffolds into the canon but also for motivation and engagement reasons. Defending a young adult literature text requires that the teacher address both the reason for including young adult literature in general, and reasons for using the particular texts they choose. The rationale for using a text might include its Goodreads rating and various awards that show its merit. For example, *Unwind* has received 28 novel awards, including ALA’s Best Books for Young Adults, ALA Top Ten Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers, and Abraham Lincoln Book Award Master List (Simon & Shuster, 2015).

*The Book Thief* won the Daniel Elliott Peace Award and the National Jewish Book Award for Children’s and Young Adult Literature, and *Smile* won the Eisner Award for Best Publication for a Teen Audience and the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award (YALSA, 2015). *Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie* won the Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults Award from the American Library Association (ALA, 2015a). *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* won the ALA’s Teen’s Top Ten Award for 2012 (ALA, 2015b), and *Mockingbird* won the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature (ALA, 2015c). *Looking for Alaska*, a popular John Green novel, won the important Michael L. Printz Award from the Young Adult Library Services Association for its exemplary literary merit (YALSA, 2015). *Eleanor & Park* won the same

Michael L. Printz Award years later, as well as a Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for fiction.

The rationale for using *Unwind* might include a discussion regarding the controversial yet relevant debates on pro-life vs. pro-choice that are an underlying theme in the novel. Although a teacher may choose not to focus on these elements of the text, they are still present, and a warning of the novel's content is essential when covering controversial texts. If a teacher does choose to cover these topics, the rationale should include the reason for doing so, for example, motivating students through the use of relevant and current events as well as engaging students in non-fictional and informational reading for research on the topic in addition to the novel content.

## Conclusion

Teaching literature in the secondary classroom does not have to be a debate about whether including YAL will detract from a focus on canonical text. Rather than arguing that one type of text is better than the other, we have tried to show how connecting YAL to the canon can serve as a reading ladder for students which blends the benefits of both types of texts with the ultimate goal of developing literacy and creating lifelong readers and writers.

This article provided a few suggestions of canonical texts that can be paired with current YAL, some methods that can be used to pair them, and a rationale for countering any resistance that might emerge from parents, other teachers, or administrators. This article, however, is only a place to start. There are many more canonical and YAL texts which could be paired, many more methods which can be used, and a plethora of rationales for doing so. We encourage teachers to use this article as a ladder itself - a place to take the first step but also a place to scaffold to more research and brainstorming as teachers create their own reading ladders from YAL to the canon. By doing so, we hope to break down the often arbitrary lines between traditional literary texts and the emerging collection of quality YAL texts. Breaking down these boundaries serves as one way to continue to re-think the purpose of the ELA classroom as a space to develop literacy rather than a place where students read old books. Developing literacy means reading and finding value in a variety of text types, and connecting YAL to the canon is one method for promoting this.

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